



Red Crescent volunteer faces fear after fighting

Her colleagues and friends now call her “the burier”. For Inass Mouaiid, a 25-year-old Iraqi Red Crescent volunteer, burying 50 bodies was a gruesome task. But she also had the courage to carry injured people to hospitals while under fire. Despite the pressures of a traditional society reluctant to see women taking an active part in rescue operations in the battlefield, Inass risked her life to protect the dignity of her fellow citizens. Today, while she is more concerned for her personal safety, she continues her work as a volunteer with children.



Inass Mouaiid, an Iraqi Red Crescent volunteer, had to convince her family and fellow workers that she could have an active role in rescue efforts during wartime.

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In an attempt to relax after many nerve-racking days of work, Inass and her fellow Iraqi Red Crescent volunteers share many sad stories of their rescue operations. One in particular, Basra University, was the saddest. Inass, another woman, Israa, and Mohamed – all young volunteers – used an ambulance and a pick-up truck to ferry the dead to the morgue.

The university compound and the small lake next to it were scattered with the bodies of dead soldiers. Inass found two severed heads, buried in the mud next to the lake. Her two colleagues could not bear to retrieve the heads and put them in the pick-up with the other body parts, so Inass volunteered for the task.

Putrified and dismembered bodies

“I tried to pull up one head by its hair, but failed because it was too well stuck in the mud,” she remembers in gruesome detail. Kneeling in this field of death, she hesitated for a moment, tempted to abandon this horrific effort. “But then I began to think that this man had a family, and possibly children who are waiting to hear any news about him. This gave me the courage to try again,” Inass said.

“I grabbed the head by one ear and put my other hand into the mud under the skull to lift it out carefully.” She had to do this slowly to protect what remained of the face’s features “to be able to take a photo and hopefully to identify him” she noted. She used the same technique to recover the second head.





*Despite the end of major hostilities,
insecurity is widespread.*

Inass says she will never forget the second disembodied head. Its eyes were staring at her plaintively, as if pleading: "Please bury me." "It made me feel sick, but we still had much to do."

The small lake beside Basra University contained many bodies, that had started decomposing after spending several days in the water. Inass and Israa could not swim, so Mohamed had to plunge into the fetid water. He tied a rope to the first body but feared the body would fall apart when pulled to the bank.

The two girls held the other end of the rope. "Once Mohamed had finished tying the body, we pulled it slowly towards ourselves. We then used our stretcher to carry the body carefully to the pick-up. The process took hours, slowly placing each body on the stretcher and carrying the victims from the lake to the truck," recalls Inass.

Fear for her safety

Now, Inass is more concerned about her personal safety and being kidnapped. The streets in her neighbourhood, which she knows by heart, have a new dark face. There are persistent rumours that gangs are kidnapping women, raping and killing them.

To protect themselves, some girls carry knives; others do not venture outdoors without the protection of a male relative. Going out alone is a risky decision. Insecurity has made it dangerous for a young woman in Iraq to leave her home, even to go to school.

But that hasn't stopped Inass, who wears the headscarf and was raised in a traditional religious family, from being outgoing. She has paid a visit to each person she had managed to bring to the hospital. "I felt that those wounded people needed a smile and affection as much as health care. I didn't hesitate to express my sympathy with them."

Inass is proud of what she has done because she dared to be herself, regardless of the pressures of society. Prior to and during the war, the main problem facing female Iraqi Red Crescent volunteers was to convince their traditional society that they could have an active role in rescue efforts during military operations.

"My family, neighbours, even people in the streets told me that battlefields are not intended for women", she explained. "This attitude motivated me even more to prove that women have a helping role in wartime" she added.

"Not all Red Crescent work is so horrific," Inass says. I am now involved in psychological support activities at a children's summer camp. Dealing with children gives me the energy and motivation to continue my voluntary work."

XXVIII^e

Conférence internationale

de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Genève 2003

Comité d'organisation

Case postale 372, CH-1211 Genève 19,
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XXVIIIth

International Conference

of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
Geneva 2003

Organizing Committee

P.O. Box 372, CH-1211 Geneva 19,
Switzerland

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Conferencia Internacional

de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
Ginebra 2003

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